Volume II.
Number 2.

Week of
January 27, 1941

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

INDEX

Stage Play	Pages
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
*Boys and Girls Together	475, 476, 477
*Cabin in the Sky	463, 464, 465
*Charley's Aunt	469, 470, 471
*Corn Is Green (The)	454, 455, 456
†*Cream in the Well (The)	404, 405, 406, 407
Crazy With the Heat	410, 411, 412
Eight O'Clock Tuesday	424, 425, 426, 427
First Stop to Heaven	427, 428, 429
*Flight to the West	434, 435, 436
Flying Gerardos (The)	437, 438, 439
*George Washington Slept Here	466, 467, 468
*Hellzapoppin	495, 496, 497
*Hold On to Your Hats	481, 482, 483
*It Happens on Ice	472, 473, 474
*Johnny Belinda	478, 479, 480

Stage Play	Pages
†*Lady in the Dark	400, 401, 402, 403
Lady Who Came to Stay (The)	430, 431, 432, 433
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*Louisiana Purchase	484, 485, 486
*Man Who Came to Dinner (The)	492, 493, 494
*Meet the People	440, 441
*Mr. and Mrs. North	413, 414, 415, 416
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
Night of Love	421, 422, 423
*Old Acquaintance	448, 449, 450
*Pal Joey	442, 443, 444
*Panama Hattie	460, 461, 462
Retreat to Pleasure	451, 452, 453
*Separate Rooms	487, 488
*Tobacco Road	498, 499, 500
*Twelfth Night	457, 458, 459

† Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of January 27, 1941.
† "The Cream in the Well" opened Monday, January 20th, at the Booth Theatre.
† "Lady in the Dark" opened Thursday, January 23rd, at the Alvin Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
$15.00

"Lady in the Dark"

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 24, 1941*

Dreaming Lady

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

TO BEGIN with, "Lady in the Dark" demonstrates with fine conclusiveness that Miss Gertrude Lawrence is the greatest feminine performer in the theater.

As the editor of a woman's magazine, whose psycho-analyzed dreams supply the subject matter of Moss Hart's musical play, Miss Lawrence has an opportunity to do some of the most spectacular emotional gamut-running in modern stage history, together with songs and dances, and she takes heroic advantage of every opportunity. Never has she been more brilliant or more fascinating. "Lady in the Dark" is a shrewd and lavish show, which mixes realism with fantasy and drama with music in the most prodigal proportions, and Mr. Hart's book, Ira Gershwin's lyrics, Kurt Weill's music and Hassard Short's production make handsome contributions to what is sure to be its vast success. But it is Miss Lawrence who, by the dazzling excitement of her presence and the radiant versatility of her talent, makes the new work her personal triumph. Whether singing, dancing, playing emotional scenes, doing comedy or indulging in a bit of strip tease, she is the wonder girl of the drama season.

* * *

This, of course, is the already celebrated musical play that is said to be Mr. Hart's paean to his psychoanalyst. It is my captious suspicion that "Lady in the Dark" is a show, rather than a play. Its emotional power is by no means overwhelming, and its propaganda for the soul-curing virtues of psychoanalysis is rather on the primitive side. As a feat of showmanship, however, it is unquestionably brilliant. The plan of the work is to dramatize the case history of a businesslike but neurotic young woman and to present the scenes of her troubled dreams in terms of musical comedy fantasy. Mr. Hart uses his heroine's subconscious as the springboard for an enlivening and imaginative foray into song and dance, and it is these adventures in the dream world that provide "Lady in the Dark" with its greatest interest. The shifts back and forth between the realism of the drama and the musical gayety of the fantasy are shrewdly handled and are a tribute to both the author and the smoothness of modern stage machinery.

* * *

Among the pleasures of "Lady in the Dark" is the return of Ira Gershwin to the business of lyric-writing. Always Mr. Gershwin's lyrics have been a delight, and one of the things wrong with the theater of late has been the absence of songs with his words accompanying them. In writing the lyrics for the dream sequences of the new work he was faced with a task that must have been particularly difficult, and he has come through with great success, keeping handsomely to the mood of fantasy and remaining bright and witty. Upon one or two occasions there was the danger that Mr. Weill's music might grow slightly monotonous in its efforts to keep to the proper mood, but the score proved tuneful, imaginative and almost invariably striking. I would hesitate to pick out the numbers that seemed destined to the greatest popularity, but I particularly recommend to you "My Ship," "The Saga of Jenny" and "Tschaikowsky." In fact, the way in which Danny Kaye stops the show with the song made up of the names of Russian composers and Miss Lawrence proceeds to top him with her story of Jenny, the girl without inhibitions, is one of the remarkable things about "Lady in the Dark."

* * *

Of the supporting members of the cast, I suppose it is Mr. Kaye whose contribution to the evening is most remarkable. For it is his problem to appear as a swishy magazine photographer, and he actually manages to make the fellow both bearable and funny. I should say that his chief virtue is that he indicates to you pretty clearly that he is only acting. There is an excellent performance by a new juvenile named Macdonald Carey, who is in great danger of being snapped up by the screen at any moment. Bert Lytell handles the truncated role of the heroine's married lover believably, and Victor Mature, the film player, at least doesn't play the part of a screen star arrogantly. Donald Randolph is properly heroic as the dashing psycho-analyst. Miss Margaret Dale is brisk and skillful as a sensible magazine woman, and Miss Natalie Schafer is correctly fluttery as a foolish one. Miss Evelyn Wyckoff manages an infinitesimal role attractively. The costumes of Irene Sharaff and the settings of Harry Horner are of great aid to the work. Miss Lawrence, to put it mildly, is at her best in "Lady in the Dark."

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 24, 1941*

"Lady in the Dark" Evening of Dreams for Gertrude Lawrence

"Lady in the Dark," a musical play by Moss Hart; music by Kurt Weill; lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Produced by Sam H. Harris at the Alvin Theatre, New York, Jan. 23, 1941.

★ ★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

THERE are dreams come true in this "Lady in the Dark" which even the psychoanaylst in the play never suspected. The Moss Hart triumph finally broke into high society last night at the Alvin Theatre.

First, there is Moss Hart's dream of doing a play on his own, with his favorite co-laborer, George Kaufman, just a good pal and friendly adviser.

There is Sam H. Harris' dream of having another music play so big and so different that it will in some way equal such former Harris' triumphs as "I'd Rather Be Right" and "Of Thee I Sing."

There is Hassard Short's dream of staging a production spotted with marvelous (and silent) revolving stages, and such opulence in lighting and costumes as have never been shown before.

And finally there is Gertrude Lawrence's dream of one day having a star part in which she can do all the attractive things she does best as an entertainer without losing her A1 standing as a dramatic actress.

Dreams Come True

It is this combination of dreams come true that serves to make "Lady in the Dark" the unusual spectacle it is. Spectacle, too, is the word, for there is more show than substance in it.

Fine individual scenes, with Miss Lawrence always at the peak of her talents. Marvelous stage effects, most skillfully maneuvered. Striking originality in every picture.

But still the story of a tortured lady who for two hours flirts with a mental breakdown and then succumbs prettily to a bit of common romantic sentiment. This ties her in with a profound hope of the audience that she finally will come out of her trying adventure and find peace. Or at least a good night's sleep.

Mr. Hart's use of a psychoanalyst's consulting room as the basis of a dream play must be counted an inspiration. He thus immediately links two interested publics to his efforts—the new public that has been hearing and reading of the wizards of the quiz who straighten out inhibitions and complexes, and the older public that is almost as loyal to the dream pattern as it is to the Cinderella pattern in play building.

Neurotic Lady

Miss Lawrence, as you probably have heard, is the neurotic editor of a woman's magazine. For some years she has been living with her financial backer and trying to justify the relationship with the excuse that his wife will not divorce him.

That, and a further sense of frustration springing vaguely from her male associates' resentment of her as an executive, finally drives her to the mind doctor. It is the revealment of her dreams that furnishes the fantasy and the musical sequences.

These, as noted, are handsomely and skillfully done. Seeing herself as a glamor girl Miss Lawrence breaks into song very effectively. Once she sweetly sings a memory song of her youth. Again she vitalises a jazz number with all the current gestures. Finally she sings "The Saga of Jenny" with the enthusiasm and that personal charm with which she won her first American public in the "Chariot Revue." Having good memories, many of her hearers cheered this one last night.

In her support she has that newly-risen comedian, Danny Kaye, who steps forth confidently to justify his admirers in the belief that he is started on a fine career.

Margaret Dale is there to give poise to the cast, and Bert Lytell to play the anchor man among the lovers. Victor Mature, a handsome fellow from the screen world, plays a glamour lad modestly and convincingly and Macdonald Carey gives the romance a proper weight.

Kurt Weill has written a balanced and excellent score. Ira Gershwin has furnished several splendid lyrics. Harry Horner has spent a generous budget generously in designing the scenery and Irene Sharaff has done as well with the costumes.

It is all big and impressive and generally satisfying. But there will be a crowd of other worshippers awaiting the Lawrence lady when her dreams are spent and she is again her old normal and un-psyched self.

"Lady in the Dark"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *January 24, 1941*

'Lady in the Dark,' With Gertrude Lawrence, Opens at the Alvin

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

GLITTERING scenery revolved on what must have been half a dozen turntables last evening at the Alvin Theater and there was Gertrude Lawrence, triumphant in the midst of it. Fantasy, reality and the song and dance were copiously mixed, sometimes behaving like oil and water. Through all this Moss Hart determinedly told a story about a woman executive who suffered a depression and regained her balance when she found the right man.

The story of Mr. Hart's "Lady in the Dark," which is described as a musical play, is fundamentally as simple as the production Hassard Short has built around it is complex. Mr. Hart is writing about a magazine editor who, in the middle of bewildering success and just as an issue was about to go to press, started dreaming strange dreams. She suffered terrors and feelings of inadequacy and trembled at the thought of approaching marriage. So she went to a psychoanalyst. After some time he discovered that she was upset because, when she was a very little girl, her parents had said she wasn't pretty. True love completed the cure.

Plot summaries are apt to prove rather pale reflections of plays and as a digest of "Lady in the Dark" the foregoing is almost entirely irrelevant. The larger, more gorgeous part of the play has nothing much to do with the plot, being devoted to the lady's dreams and memories. She has splendid dreams, full of song and often of merriment. When she is undergoing an hallucination, she sings to the music of Kurt Weill, which is fine music, and uses the words of Ira Gershwin, which are superior words. She inhabits the brightest of universes, designed by Hassard Short, and the Albertina Rasch dancers perform their finest capers for her. If depressions result in such splendors—as from all accounts they decidedly do not—they are to be courted by all sane persons. Who would put a magazine to bed when they might enjoy the pleasures so bright and so fantastic?

Between dreams the plot goes on, made almost too credible by Mr. Hart's writing and by the sharp penetration of Miss Lawrence's really admirable acting. Her versatility is put to a tremendous test, and meets it without a quaver. Her singing of such gay songs as "The Saga of Jenny" and such tender ones as "This Is New," and the bubbling gayety she brings to the best of the dream sequences are as delighting as her picture of the emotionally tormented woman is perceptive and revealing. And the others in the cast—Donald Randolph, Margaret Dale, Danny Kaye and Victor Mature notable among them—support her nobly.

There is so much that is bright in "Lady in the Dark," and so much of Miss Lawrence, that it is perhaps unimportant that the play and production do not really jell. But it is my suspicion that they do not, probably because the central theme of mental disturbance requires more honest treatment than Mr. Hart has given it. About the psychosis of his heroine, Mr. Hart tells either too much or too little. Between bright fantasy and mental disturbance there is a fundamental discrepancy. The mind balks at accepting both in one play—anyhow, this mind does.

But anything which has Miss Lawrence in it, and particularly Miss Lawrence singing as of old, is obviously a thing to see. We can worry about the sincerity of stories some other time.

'LADY IN THE DARK'

A musical play in two acts by Moss Hart; lyrics by Ira Gershwin; music by Kurt Weill; production and lighting by Hassard Short; choreography by Albertina Rasch; settings by Harry Horner; costumes by Irene Sharaff. Presented at the Alvin Theater on January 23, 1941, by Sam H. Harris. The cast:

Dr. Brooks	Donald Randolph
Miss Bowers	Jeanne Shelby
Liza Elliott	Gertrude Lawrence
Miss Foster	Evelyn Wyckoff
Miss Stevens	Ann Lee
Maggie Grant	Margaret Dale
Alison Du Bois	Natalie Schafer
Russell Paxton	Danny Kaye
Charley Johnson	Macdonald Carey
Randy Curtis	Victor Mature
Joe, an office boy	Ward Tallmon
Tom, an office boy	Nelson Barclift
Kendall Nesbitt	Bert Lytell
Helen, a model	Virginia Peine
Ruthie, a model	Gedda Petry
Carol, a model	Patricia Deering
Marcia, a model	Margaret Westberg
Ben Butler	Dan Harden
Barbara	Eleanor Eberle
Jack	Davis Cunningham

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *January 24, 1941*

Lady in the Dark Triumph for Miss Lawrence

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

MOSS HART'S new musical play, Lady in the Dark, is in many respects the most lavish and beautiful entertainment to reach Broadway in many seasons. It is a gorgeously designed production, and it boasts some of the most effective music ever written by Kurt Weill. Its theme is a serious and mature composition, written with some of Mr. Hart's choicest language. And in it Miss Gertrude Lawrence reaches new heights of artistry.

Having said all that, I have to admit that the story Mr. Hart is telling at times becomes repetitious and dull and that it seems to take an interminable time to tell it. Perhaps some of us had been led by advance reports—and by a predisposition in Miss Lawrence's favor—to expect too much, but in respect to its tempo I found it disappointing.

This is a play with music rather than just a musical comedy. Its book, like that of Pal Joey, is a piece of realism and not merely happy make-believe, despite the fact that at least two-thirds of it is sheer fantasy. Mr. Hart's heroine is a real, live, flesh-and-blood woman during a greater part of the story, retreating at intervals into the dream world that provides the more spectacular and colorful side of the entertainment. And Miss Lawrence plays magnificently in a role that makes heavy demands upon her versatility.

* * *

Lady in the Dark is the case history of a tired and neurotic business woman, editor of a fashion magazine, who craves romance and has never been able to find it. She tells her life story to a psycholanalyst, and it is her review of past scenes, incidents and dreams that swing before our eyes by means of Hassard Short's ingenious revolving stage. Eventually we discover that Miss Lawrence's trouble is the result of a complex acquired during her childhood. At the age of 3, it seems, she was told she was not and never would be beautiful. At the age of 18 she had been the smartest student in high school—and the most unloved. Her sense of feminine inferiority had forced her to become a hard-driving, go-getting, domineering and extremely efficient executive. And now here she is craving only love. Eventually, you will be glad to know, she discovers it, and right in her office, where it had been waiting for her all the time.

I think the outstanding feature of the new play is Miss Lawrence's acting. Her transitions from the deepest of tragedy to the brightest of comedy are remarkable, and there is a certain depth to her portrayal of the restless, nervous and repressed woman that I have never seen in any of her previous characterizations. She played down her emotional scenes. There was nothing giddy or light headed about her mannerisms, and she marched straight into the heart of the audience.

* * *

Next to Miss Lawrence the honors of the evening went to Danny Kaye, who is extremely adept in his comedy role and who practically stopped the show with his one rapid-fire song, Tschaikowsaky, an interpolated number that has nothing to do with the play but which provides its most exciting diversion. This is Mr. Kaye's first appearance here in a legitimate play, although he was seen briefly two years ago in the Straw Hat Revue. He is something of a discovery.

Victor Mature, the celebrated movie star, is the hero of Lady in the Dark. He plays with an engaging manner, simply, directly and effectively. The experienced Bert Lytell adds his accomplished style to the play's other assets, and MacDonald Carey, a newcomer to the New York stage, deserves high praise for his performance of the lucky young man who finally wins Miss Lawrence.

The dancing by a group of Albertina Rasch girls was exquisite, particularly in one beautifully dressed ballet called the Dance of the Tumblers.

Mr. Weill's music is on the modern side, and Ira Gershwin's lyrics are recitatives rather than ballads. Of the songs other than Tschaikowsky I most enjoyed My Ship, which has a plaintive refrain, and Miss Lawrence's highly amusing Saga of Jenny. The Mapleton High Choral has a strongly nostalgic quality about it, and The Princess of Pure Delight is a charming melody.

Harry Horner's settings are, as I have indicated, magnificent, and the dream world he has created is not too bizarre or fantastic.

If the first act moved as briskly as the second I would be better pleased, although that would perhaps be asking for perfection.

"Lady in the Dark"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *January 24, 1941*

Gertrude Lawrence Seen in "Lady in the Dark"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

WITHOUT putting on a mortarboard or reaching for a pointer, permit me to insist that the best classroom demonstration of the differences between writing and production, drama and theatre, to be given hereabouts at many a meeting of the local dramatic schools was conducted last night at the Alvin under the title of "Lady in the Dark."

Although Moss Hart's new offering is billed as a musical play, it must be saluted as more of a musical than as a play. In spite of its preoccupation with psychoanalysis, dreams, and a lady editor who is a frustrated enchantress, it does not belong in the realm of those activities behind the footlights where words supply their own music, where ideas bear close inspection, or where even an unguessable story is told so absorbingly that it holds the attention on its own merits.

Instead "Lady in the Dark" blossoms in that special world where greasepaint is blood, where spotlights do the duty of the sun, where a revolving stage is a stand-in for the fates, where dreams end up by being choruses, and where an actress' personality is a welcome substitute for the Life Force. As such an expression of the Crummies domain at its most efficient and resplendent, Mr. Hart's scenario, as filled in by Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, Hassard Short, Irene Sharaff, and the players, has many things to recommend it, and will have even more when, after its true character has been more fully recognized, its dialogue has been vigorously pruned. For, both as an example of stagecraft at its most breath-taking, and as an invitation to a performance by Gertrude Lawrence which is incredible in its virtuosity, "Lady in the Dark" is little short of miraculous.

Freud and the Girls

Although at present much too much of a muchness, and given to dragging its way toward a conclusion predictable from the outset even to those who swear at, instead of by, psychoanalysts, "Lady in the Dark" boasts virtues as a production which are as difficult to overestimate as it is hard to underestimate the seriousness with which it deserves to be taken as a literary drama.

Forgetting the dignity of the inkwell's possible yield (and the tedium Mr. Hart from time to time invites by failing to take his own story as casually as it deserves), let's come to the theatrical wonders evoked by a play which does little more than use Freud as a book for an unbelievably elaborate, always smooth-running, often charming Christmas pantomime for adults.

Mr. Hart's tale of the unhappy editress of a fashion magazine who solves her inner problems by going to a psychoanalyst and finds a husband (apparently with no more aid from Freud than you or I could have given here) is accompanied by the wittiest, most beguiling score Mr. Weill has yet written. It is set by Harry Horner against a background of revolving screens with a minimum of effect. It is given the benefit of some of Ira Gershwin's gayest lyrics. It is gowned and costumed (a distinction again worthy of the attention of dramatic students) with admirable style by Hattie Carnegie and by Irene Sharaff, in her finest vein. Its book has been well directed by Mr. Hart, and the production as a whole has been co-ordinated and lighted by Mr. Short in a manner meriting only the most unreserved of superlatives. Moreover, it is admirably acted by Donald Randolph, Margaret Dale, Danny Kaye, Macdonald Carey, and Victor Mature.

Miss Lawrence Excellent

But, in spite of the miracle of its staging, "Lady in the Dark" is in the last analysis the most elaborate one-woman show ever to have been presented. It is Miss Lawrence's evening. And she has never given a more fascinating, disciplined, or compelling performance. She faces an assignment upon which Maurice Evans, in the days of his uncut "Hamlet," would have had to look with dismay. She is on the stage almost all of the time. And while there, demands are made upon her which in the case of any other actress would be both merciless and impossible.

Miss Lawrence sings. She dances. She is all sunshine. She is troubled. She is a high school girl. She is a distressed victim of indecision. In fact, she is asked to run almost the full gamut of dramatic emotions not only from A to Z but from Z to A. It is a joy to watch the grace with which she handles her lithe body when, with a dancer's skill, she moves about the stage and swings her corners even when she is not dancing. It is a joy, too, to note the unsparing intensity of her playing which keeps her, at her quieter moments, perched upon her toes with her high heels far off the ground. Her singing of the saga of Jenny in the excellent circus ballet which comes as a dream-sequence is a masterpiece of joyous innuendo.

As always her wheedling voice is a delight. If it still showed the effects of the grippe when she started off last night, it was entirely liberated before the evening was over. Make no mistake about it. Miss Lawrence is at her best, and a matchless best it is, in "Lady in the Dark." So is the theatre from the point of view of the sheer mechanical wisardy of a production. Regardless of what you may think of the book's pretensions (especially in its present sorrowfully unabridged form), Miss Lawrence and the staging offer irresistible reasons for journeying to the Alvin and enjoying many things while there.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM", *January 24, 1941*

'Lady in the Dark' Gets The Nod From Mr. K.

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

PRECEDED for weeks by rumor's golden trumpets, *Lady in the Dark* finally arrived last night. It will not make history, but it will decidedly make conversation. It is not a milestone, but it will certainly be a hit. For weeks to come, you will find it served with the first course of every fashionable dinner-party.

The best way to evaluate it is to say, in the language of commerce, that the product is slight but the packaging is superb. All by itself Mr. Hart's play about the mixed-up lady editor of a fashion magazine who gets straightened out through psychoanalysis is superficial, somewhat clumsily written, and utterly uninspired in plot. But it is not meant to be taken all by itself; and with the lady's dreams set lightly to music and blown up into a gorgeous spectacle, with the atmosphere of her fashion magazine lending touches of comedy, and with Gertrude Lawrence on hand to sing and dance as well as be neurotic, "Lady in the Dark" becomes very good theater.

As for what was eating the lady, she was the plain daughter of a beautiful mother, and at school the boys ran after prettier girls. So she had taken refuge in a career. But she learned, not too late, that she didn't want to be executive; she wanted to be yielding. And she also learned, not too late, that she thought she was in love with one man and was really in love with another.

This last discovery may be fine as psychoanalysis but it's not very much as plot. Women in plays have thought they were in love with one man and really been in love with another for at least three centuries. In fact, more plays have gone in for that particular situation than for anything else I can think of.

Anyway, the lady had dreams, dreams as sumptious as they were respectable, dreams out of musical comedy rather than Krafft-Ebing. In her dreams she became a glamor girl, and sang and danced like an angel, and all her acquaintances wore marvelous clothes, and moved around on four stages—and that's where the fun comes in.

If Mr. Hart fails to contribute much more to the play than a framework and a bright idea (even his comedy doesn't click too well), a lot of other people have brought enough to "Lady in the Dark" to keep it bright and spirited. Kurt Weill's music is always suave and often tuneful, Ira Gershwin's lyrics are ingenious and gay, Harry Horner's sets and Irene Sharaff's costumes are splashed with brilliant color, and Albertina Rasch's dance numbers have zip and imagination.

As for the acting, probably no one else but Miss Lawrence could fill the title role. She handles its serious side deftly, and in her dream sequences gets youthfully back to the kind of singing and dancing that made her original reputation. She was at her liveliest with an amusing song—whose tune is reminiscent of "Eadie Was a Lady"—called "Jenny." A number of others in the cast did well, but special honors must go to Danny Kaye, who literally stopped the show with a patter song called "Tschaikowsky."

"Lady in the Dark"

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *January 24, 1941*

Gertrude Lawrence Appears in Moss Hart's Musical Drama, 'Lady in the Dark,' With a Score by Kurt Weill and Lyrics by Ira Gershwin

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALL things considered, the American stage may as well take a bow this morning. For Moss Hart's musical play, "Lady in the Dark," which was put on at the Alvin last evening, uses the resources of the theatre magnificently and tells a compassionately story triumphantly. Note the distinction between "musical play" and "musical comedy." What that means to Mr. Hart's mind is a drama in which the music and the splendors of the production rise spontaneously out of the heart of the drama, evoking rather than embellishing the main theme.

Although the idea is not new, since "Cabin in the Sky" and "Pal Joey" have been moving in that direction this year, Mr. Hart and his talented associates have carried it as close to perfection as any one except an academician can require. Eschewing for the moment his blistering style of comedy, Mr. Hart has written a dramatic story about the anguish of a human being. Kurt Weill has matched it with the finest score written for the theatre in years. Ira Gershwin's lyrics are brilliant. Harry Horner's whirling scenery gives the narrative a transcendent loveliness. As for Gertrude Lawrence, she is a goddess: that's all.

* * *

What brings this about is the emotional confusion of the woman editor of a smart women's magazine. Up to now she has been contented, living happily with a married man whose wife would not divorce him, and absorbed in work at which she is conspicuously successful. But suddenly everything has gone awry. Frightened by the jangle of her nerves, she goes to a psychoanalyst. "Lady In the Dark" is the drama of the strange images he draws out of her memories. In the end the analyst resolves her confusion into an intelligible pattern—proving, incidentally, that you never know whom you love, which is a terrifying prospect, but that is neither here nor there.

If that sounds like a macabre theme, you can rely upon Mr. Hart's lightness of touch and his knack for tossing in a wise-crack to keep the narrative scenes buoyant. And the long, fantastic interludes when the editor is exploring her memories carry "Lady in the Dark" into a sphere of gorgeously bedizened make-believe that will create theatrical memories for every one who sees them. Mr. Weill's score is a homogenous piece of work, breaking out in song numbers over a mood of dark evocation—nostalgic at times, bursting also into humor and swing. And Mr. Gershwin, in turn, has written his lyrics like a thoroughbred. Uproariously witty when the time is right, he also writes in impeccable taste for the meditative sequences.

* * *

To carry the burden of such a huge production, Mr. Horner has set his scenery on four revolving stages that weave naturalism and fantasy into a flowing fabric; and Hassard Short, as usual, has lighted it regally. The production is a rhapsody in blue and gold, giving reality in unreal size, shape and color, and Irene Sharaff's costumes are boldly imaginative. As the mistress of the choreography, Albertina Rasch has designed vivid lines of dance movement, and the staging is full of grace and resourcefulness.

No one but Miss Lawrence could play a virtuoso part of such length and variety. She is on stage almost at curtain-rise, and she is never off it long—leaping from melancholy to revelry with a swiftness that would be bewildering if she could not manage caprices so well. She sings, she dances. After playing a scene as a mature woman, she steps across the stage to play a scene as a schoolgirl without loss of enchantment. Sometimes Miss Lawrence has been accused of overacting, which is a venial sin at most. But no one will accuse her of being anything but superb in "Lady In the Dark." She plays with anxious sincerity in the narrative scenes and with fullness and richness in the fantasy. For good measure, she sings "The Saga of Jenny" like an inspired showgirl.

* * *

The cast, under Mr. Hart's direction is excellent throughout. As a comic fashion photographer, Danny Kaye, who was cutting up in "The Straw Hat Revue" last year, is infectiously exuberant. Macdonald Carey, who played in the Globe Shakespeare at the World's Fair, acts the part of an aggressive magazine man with a kind of casual forthrightness. As a glamorous movie hero, Victor Mature is unobjectionably handsome and affable. Margaret Dale has an amusing part as a fashion editor and plays it with dry humor, and Natalie Schaffer has some fun with a supermodish gadabout. In the unwelcome part of the sympathetic lover, Bert Lytell turns a good performance, and Donald Randolph, as the analyst, also behaves like a gentleman.

All these actors and variegated items of a show have been pulled into place by a theatre that has been put on its mettle by an occasion. "Lady in the Dark" is a feast of plenty. Since it also has a theme to explore and express, let's call it a work of theatre art.

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *January 24, 1941*

'Lady in the Dark' Premiere at the Alvin

Gertrude Lawrence Stars in Lavish Musical Play About a Fashion Editor and Her Complexes

By JOHN ANDERSON

ON THE eve of last week's scheduled premiere of "Lady in the Dark," Gertrude Lawrence came down with the grippe and instead of opening the show merely opened her mouth and said "Ahh . . h." Broadway spent a desolate week watching her fever charts, but made up for its disappointment last night when Sam H. Harris presented the show at the Alvin, and revealed that his star is not only well, but wonderful.

As a lovely heroine in distress she cries, and dances, and sings her way enchantingly through a spectacular play by Moss Hart, with music by Kurt Weill.

It is a play that requires nearly three hours and four revolving stages to reach a given, and I must say a rather obvious, point a play party psychoanalysis, part ballet and part drama.

Whatever else it is, though, it is a triumph of stagecraft, a beautiful and imaginative production, that is part dreams, part fantasy, brilliantly done but wearisomely long and a little pretentious.

In it Mr. Hart explores the more Broadway aspects of psychoanalysis as they affect the smart and successful lady editor of a fashion magazine. Poor Liza Elliott, after ten years of editing, finds that she can't keep her mind on her work. She can't concentrate, she has dreams, and she throws paperweights at her art director.

Though she swears she is the happy mistress of the man who founded the magazine for her, she doesn't want to marry him and the first thing you know there she is in Dr. Brooks' office, with the lights dimming, prying around among the fixations and fears of her subconscious self.

Tour of Complexes

Thereafter the show makes quite a tour of Liza's lobes complexes and neuroses, sometimes falling out of the brain pan and into the fire of our heroine's suppressed desires. When she is not letting us see handsome dream sequences in a sort of neurotic revue, she is back in the office driving herself and her staff frantic with her maladjusted subconscious.

It is there that she tries to distract herself with the oomph-interest of a Hollywood Itman and quarrels again with the arrogant art director.

Her most fascinating dream, I thought, was the circus interlude when she found herself on trial before a giddy ringmaster for not making up her mind. The art director was prosecutor and the Hollywood glamor guy attorney for the defense in a passage that was gay, cockeyed, beautifully costumed and enlivened by two hilarious songs, — Danny Kaye's "Tschaikowsky" and Miss Lawrence's superbly done "The Saga of Jenny" in which

(Continued on page 404)

"The Cream in the Well"

Reprinted from NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM, *January 21, 1941*

Cream in the Well Stars Martha Sleeper, Erickson

By SIDNEY B. WHIPPLE

IT IS perhaps too obvious to say that Lynn Riggs' new play, The Cream in the Well, turns sour before the first long act has dragged its weary way to the curtain, but, in view of the acidity of his principal characters and the unwholesome atmosphere surrounding them, that is about the only adequate description of it I can find for the moment.

The play, in which Martin Gabel and Carly Wharton must have seen some merit, else they would not have produced it, is a study in abnormal psychology, and purports to show, I suppose, the tragic complications arising out of incestuous yearnings. But there is no depth to its study, no apparent understanding of the mental problems involved, and as a play it cannot base any relationship whatsoever to the high tragedies of the ancients which were based on that dangerous theme.

Instead it is a drab and unmoving story of a sister's love for her brother, embittering not only their own lives but those of all their relatives and most of their friends. It leads to the suicide of the brother's fiancee under the compulsion of the evil sister, and finally the sister's expiation through her own suicide. Everybody, as you see, is made unhappy, including the audience.

Mr. Riggs has made some attempt to relieve the general blackness of the situation by sketching in a few comic characters, such as another sister who should have had her adenoids attended to, and a country lawyer who was for some strange reason enamored of her and who was inclined to giggle at the mere thought of love. Somehow I preferred Mr. Riggs' tragedy to his comedy, bad as it was.

All this is supposed to have occurred in the Indian Territory of 1906, and it is couched, of course, in homespun language, with a plethora of "ains't," "goddamits" and double negatives, which are popularly supposed to be the mark of the yokel. Unfortunately the ladies and gentlemen who were called upon to speak like backwoodsmen did so with Princeton or Harvard inflection, and the result was somewhat incongruous.

Of the acting it is unnecessary to say very much beyond the fact that it was as unconvincing and articial as the play itself. Miss Martha Sleeper's conception of the unhappy heroine was peevish rather than powerful. Leif Erickson gave an inconclusive performance of the brother, though this may have been due to the rather vague outline of his character as offered by the author. I felt sorry for Myron McCormick, who was sunk in one of the most dismal parts he has had in several years. He carries it off well, to be sure, but this is no role for him.

In the midst of all this Oklahoma rabble the cultured tones of Miss Mary Morris as the mother of an untutored brood were scarcely in keeping with Mr. Riggs' lines, but Ralph Theadore made up this deficiency by laying on the farmerisms with a trowel.

The Cream in the Well is merely a morbid excursion into an unpleasant subject, and it lacks even the artistry that might have provided an excuse for it.

Reprinted from NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM," *January 21, 1941*

A Stark Play, And a Dull One

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

I DON'T know how stark you like your drama, but unless your tastes are virtually depraved I should think *The Cream in the Well* would be stark enough. Mr. Riggs has gone wandering in the darkest regions of Ibsen and Strindberg, Lillian Hellman and Eugene O'Neill, and come up with a play that makes all of them seem light-hearted and jolly. Unhappily, in achieving a new high in grimness, Mr. Riggs has dropped down to the low of his career.

Tragedy founded on strange and unnatural emotions, involving intense and violent natures, must either rise above every-day reality and achieve a power and majesty of its own, or topple over into absurdity and melodrama. The rules are pitiless; there is seldom any middle ground. In *The Cream in the Well* Mr. Riggs has dealt with the incestuous love of a sister and brother, and shown how the sister, thwarted in her desire, becomes a creature of hate and malice and evil who wrecks the happiness, and even destroys the lives, of others.

It is an ambitious theme which I have no desire to laugh at, but—considering how it is presented—I certainly cannot take it seriously. Its piled-up horrors and crimes, involving insanity and suicide and even a touch of male prostitution—all to the accompaniment of a raging windstorm—could maintain their pitch only with the help of tremendous talent. And Mr. Riggs, who has never shown tremendous talent, in this case shows hardly any.

His dialogue has no vigor or tension. His atmosphere is lurid without being alive. His heroine is crudely drawn, and far from resembling the great twisted figures of evil, seems only to have atrociously bad manners.

Even his stagecraft is feeble. After churning up a lot of melodrama for a while, Mr. Riggs goes into a protracted dawdle until the final scene where the brother and sister avow their guilty love. And this scene was so tedious that an irreverent young man who sat behind me muttered to the heroine: "Go jump in the lake."

Which is exactly what she did.

The direction and some of the acting were no better than the play. As the heroine, Martha Sleeper, went at things pretty grimly, even walking sort of sideways much of the time; while Mary Morris, as a mother who knew how bad everything was, behaved throughout with a kind of monstrous calm. Virginia Campbell and Myron McCormick came off fairly well, and the others simply went through their paces.

'LADY IN THE DARK'

NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN

(Continued from page 403)

the star outshone even her past musical comedy brilliance.

These passages of fantasy are tethered unfortunately to the doctor's office like circus balloons on the end of a solemn stick. The plot is dragged heavily to earth and reality by the clinical details of mental healing and becomes tiresome. Mr. Hart's framework is his heroine's frame of mind, but somehow the Freudian implications of her trouble seem to cast shadows across a rainbow amusement.

We do see the cause of her complex when a flash-back shows the moment in her childhood when her parents thoughtlessly hurt her mind by saying that she was an ugly child, and that scene does have a tear-stained poignancy that is heartbreaking. But I think the audience knew she was in love with the art director long before the doctor found the trouble.

In any case this curious mixture provides incidents that are often interesting and scenes of lavish spectacle. Miss Lawrence, as the heart-torn and sex-tossed heroine, dominates the whole show and is on the stage nearly every moment. She is as believable in the doctor's office scenes of mental anguish, as she is captivating in the dream stories, and she emerges triumphantly in a performance that must be gruelling and exhausting.

Mr. Kaye is immensely amusing, less in the somewhat lavender business of a style photographer than in his hilarious doings in the circus fantasy, and Victor Mature, in his first Broadway appearance, plays the Hollywood star exactly for that.

Bert Lytell, Donald Randolph and Macdonald Carey are admirable in smaller parts, and Margaret Dale is excellent and makes the most of a sharp humor of a magazine executive.

Mr. Weill's score seemed to me to contain some of his best music, subtly integrated to emphasize and expand the play's meaning, and Ira Gershwin's lyrics, especially in "The Saga of Jane," are ingenious and amusing.

Harry Horner's designs for the elaborate scenes are not only handsomely effective, but miraculously manipulated, and Miss Sharaff's costumes are delightfully imaginative and colorful. Hassard Short has put the whole complicated business on the stage with such skill that it never falters in its ease and smoothness of effect.

The show is probably the most expensive way ever devised to discover peacefully what is in one woman's mind, and it provides Broadway with a remarkable, opulent, and peculiar stunt.

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS

brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

New York Sun
New York Post
New York Times
New York Daily News
New York Newspaper "PM"
New York Journal and American
New York Herald Tribune
New York World-Telegram

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

"The Cream in the Well"

Reprinted from NEW YORK SUN, *January 21, 1941*

'The Cream in the Well,' Psychological Drama, Opens at the Booth

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

A DARK, disturbing play by Lynn Riggs was performed with slow intensity last evening at the Booth Theater. In a world confused by external happenings, Mr. Riggs retains a probing interest in the human mind and in the long shadows cast over it by the taboos which so largely govern human life. His "The Cream in the Well" comes close to psychological tragedy, and is utterly unrelenting.

But it is, I think, only partially successful and in treating the matters of which Riggs is here writing, partial success is not enough. His story of peculiarly star-crossed lovers is steadily, grimly interesting. The form in which he has cast his play, if a long way from perfect, provides telling scenes and a reasonable intensification of mood. But if as a playwright you plan to delve into the darker recesses of the human spirit you need to be more than interesting, and more than competent.

Mr. Riggs's lovers are a brother and sister, living on a farm in the Indian Territory in 1906. The sister, tormented and bitter, is there throughout the play. Only toward the end does the brother return from wandering, drawn back by the love he fears and abhors. Only in the final moments of the play do the brother and sister face the fact of their love, made horrid to both by one of the race's oldest taboos. And they find no solution except suicide.

It is this love, for a long time hinted at and finally openly described, which is the center of Riggs's play. He is interested in it chiefly as it affects the participants. But through them, as the knowledge of it festers in them, it affects others. It leads to broken lives, to the suicide of a girl who had threatened to come between them and to the destruction of a young farmer who is undone by his love of the sister. It makes the sister a driven, haunted creature, dangerous to all about her. It makes the brother one of those mythical men —Mr. Riggs slips into routine here—who visit the more notorious sinks of iniquity to drown their bitter memories.

And it makes—well, call it an interesting play; call it minor-league O'Neill. Mr. Riggs's investigation of the psychological problems involved is no doubt exact, but it is never particularly deep. He enables you to understand Julie and Clabe, but does not make you feel with them. With the emotions thus left free, you have time to notice that the story is neatly arranged and that the situations are arbitrary. Instead of appearing to tell of something which had to happen, "The Cream in the Well" tells a mighty gloomy story that the author just thought up. It tells it too much in duologues, and rather too slowly.

The acting is generally excellent. Martha Sleeper's acting describes in full, believable detail the torment of the sister, and Leif Erickson, in a much briefer part, makes the brother comprehensible. Mary Morris, as the mother of the two, does wonders with an underdeveloped role and Ralph Theadore is equally effective as the father who, comfortably ignorant of the complexities about him, worries about getting his plowing done.

There is pleasant acting, too, by Virginia Campbell, as another sister who is innocently disturbed by her lack of beaux, and Perry Wilson is appropriately edgy as a young woman whose husband hates her and whose mother is insane. I liked, also, the way that Myron McCormick depicted the decline and fall of the young farmer. Virtually everybody declines and falls in "The Cream in the Well."

'THE CREAM IN THE WELL'

A play in two acts by Lynn Riggs; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Rose Bogdanoff; staged by Martin Gabel and presented at the Booth Theater on January 20, 1941, by Carly Wharton and Mr. Gabel. The cast:

Bina	Virginia Campbell
Mrs. Sawters	Mary Morris
Julie	Martha Sleeper
Mr. Sawters	Ralph Theadore
Opal Dunham	Perry Wilson
Gard Dunham	Myron McCormick
Clabe	Leif Erickson
Blocky Lockhart	Harry Bratsburg

Reprinted from NEW YORK JOURNAL AND AMERICAN, *January 21, 1941*

'Cream in the Well' Opens at the Booth

Martha Sleeper and Leif Erickson Appear in Rustic Tragedy with Oklahoma Setting

By JOHN ANDERSON

THOUGH Lynn Riggs has brought to the theatre such mature work as "Green Grow the Lilacs" and "Russet Mantle," his latest play, which came to the Booth last night under the somewhat cryptic title, "The Cream in the Well," seems to be the sophomoric tragedy about incest every fledgling playwright is supposed to get out of his system early in his career.

As presented with a good deal of clutch-the-furniture acting by an excellent but overwrought cast, it is a gritty and uninteresting study of abnormal passion, tritely gloomy and uninspired.

Since most of it sounds like a heavy prologue to the short final scene of death and spiritual redemption, it has the general appearance of a one-act play that has been expanded by putting long drawn out sighs between the lines.

For his scene and his people Mr. Riggs goes to the Indian Territory of his birth and shows us the family Sawters living on Big Lake, near Verdigris Switch, A. D. 1906. Things hain't a-doin' so well on the farm, what with Clabe gone off to the Navy, and poor Pa Sawters with just his own two hands, and that extra eighty acres to work.

But poor Pa don't know the half of it. It was his own daughter, Julie, who sent her brother away when she found him sobbing one day on a mossy bank by the lake because he was going to marry Opal, the girl from the other shore.

Julie says she sent him away because Opal wasn't good enough for him, and he had to see the world, but, as Mr. Doodles Weaver says in "Meet the People," "We know, don't we."

Driven to Suicide

In any case, Julie's repressed desires made her a lady hellcat and she couldn't rest until she drove Opal to suicide, married Gard Dunham, Opal's left-over husband, out of twisted revenge on her guilty love and drove him to drink. By this time the Sawters seemed nearly as depressed as I was.

Then Clabe came back. He told Julie how he had degraded his own love and proposed that they frankly accept their incestuous fate. Julie, however, said everything would be all right if she just walked out into the lake far enough, which was a good idea, only I thought Clabe should have gone wading fatally with her. Curtain.

To expand such dark and tangled passion into drama of necessary dimension and tragical release, demands, of course, great power and writing of uncommon concentration. Though Mr. Riggs is a poet there is neither much sensitiveness nor perception in the dialogue, or enough real strength in drawing the characters. He never illuminates these blasted lives with compassionate understanding, or lifts the events of the play above a humdrum and obvious level to the pitch of grieving fatefulness.

Gabel Directs

Under Mr. Gabel's direction the cast works pretty strenuously at all these sex-tossed miasmas and the beauteous Martha Sleeper portrays the unhappy Julie with the sultry excitement of a thunder-squall. But until the final ten-minute scene with Leif Erickson the tension seemed artificial because the play itself had the empty gesture of marking time.

Mary Morris, Ralph Theadore, Myron McCormick and Perry Wilson over-act in an attempt to get color into some colorless dialogue, and Mr. Mielziner has set the play in some appropriately gray interiors.

The title, incidentally, comes from Pa Sawters' description of a farm his family had once, with a fine big well on it, but doggone, if every time they put milk, or cream, or butter down in it, to keep cool, the whole business turned sour. The parable is clear, since there was some unseen evil in the water that spoiled everything.

Moral: Use refrigerators and avoid incest.

"The Cream in the Well"

Reprinted from NEW YORK POST, *January 21, 1941*

Martha Sleeper Seen in "The Cream in the Well"

By JOHN MASON BROWN

ALTHOUGH "Russet Mantle" is the comedy which won for Lynn Riggs his longest Broadway run, "Green Grow the Lilacs" is the play for which he is most respected as a dramatist. The respect earned by what was fresh in the language of that folk-play from Oklahoma is something which refuses to be forgotten today even by one who has just been soured by "The Cream in the Well."

If "Green Grow the Lilacs" insists upon being remembered at the Booth, it is because Mr. Riggs' latest opus is the kind of play one would be glad to forget. Mr. Riggs is a person who, supposedly, approaches the theatre as a poet. "I feel, now more than ever," he once wrote when stating his credo, "that a playwright, to be any good, must also be a poet—and use whatever he has of a poet's equipment to see more clearly and to reveal more eloquently than ever before."

But the Mr. Riggs who achieved poetic speech in the cowboy cadences of "Green Grow the Lilacs" is someone who, though still aiming at making prose poetic, succeeds only in "The Cream in the Well" in producing balderdash of a curdling sort.

In his new tragedy Mr. Riggs' talk is meant to be big. But its bigness is appallingly little. Mr. Riggs spends the evening holding up paper stars under the impression that he is giving a demonstration at the Hayden Planetarium. His images are trite and unfortunate, and never triter or more unfortunate than when they are meant to give wings to sagacity.

Unfortunate Echoes

Incest is Mr. Riggs' theme, and of it he sings in strains much like those that Edgar Guest might use should he ever, in an ill-advised moment, be tempted to rely upon his muse's aid to rewrite "Desire Under the Elms."

Did Ethel Barrymore once appear in a South African number known as "Farm of Three Echoes"? Well, the farm on the Indian Territory which is the scene of "The Cream in the Well" raises more theatrical echoes than can be counted on an adding machine. These echoes run all the way from Ibsen, Strindberg, and O'Neill to "The Little Foxes," and include in passing all those militantly grim little plays which so many undergraduates were gleefully writing only twenty years ago.

Although he does not employ a red tablecloth, or indulge in any shooting, or have a hatchet-faced granny use an ax in the henhouse as a means of disposing of her twelve grandchildren on Thanksgiving Day, Mr. Riggs' unpleasantness is as out-of-date as international good will. He is telling the story of a horrible daughter who poisons the life of her family, sends a young girl to death in the nearby lake, and finally drowns herself after confessing (as even Thornton Burgess would have known by then) that she is in love with her brother.

Mr. Riggs does not want us to make the mistake of thinking that he is combining any old lace with his human arsenic. He likens his heroine to a well, pretty and deep, that somehow sours the milk and cream exposed to it for cooling. And, in one of the worst of his many bad speeches, he describes this maiden's heart as being similar to a wet field which she has lacerated with the wagon wheels she has driven over it.

Pity the Actors

Needless to say, all of Mr. Riggs' characters talk as if they preferred "The Doomsday Book" to The New Yorker. And none of them—glacial, broken, dumb, drunken, insane, or incestuous as they are—make very sprightly companions.

With the poor hints at her disposal, Mary Morris, who is an actress of genuine power, endeavors to play the mother as if she were Able in "Desire Under the Elms" undergoing a new experience in a serial. Martha Sleeper brings a burning intensity, much visual interest, and unquestionable skill to acting the evil daughter. It is not her fault if she increasingly resembles the kind of daughter that in a nightmare one would have imagined Tallulah Bankhead to have had in "The Little Foxes." Perry Wilson is excellent as the addled little girl who enjoys the consolation of the lake. And Leif Erickson, Ralph Theadore, Myron McCormick, and Harry Bratsburg are among those who try to do what they can with impossible materials.

It is Mr. Riggs who fails his actors, his audience, and his theme. He fails them, moreover, in terms as silly as they are meant to be serious.

Reprinted from NEW YORK TIMES, *January 21, 1941*

Lynn Riggs's 'The Cream in the Well' Has a Farm Background in the Old Indian Territory

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHY? If Lynn Riggs's "The Cream in the Well" were not written in such good prose and with so many overtones of serious thought, it would not be necessary to begin a review by asking what he has in the back of his mind, why he is torturing his characters, why he is enveloping the audience in gloom.

For this is not the work of a Broadway hack. Mr. Riggs, the Oklahoma poet, is best known in New York as author of "Green Grow the Lilacs," which recaptured the robustiousness of the old Indian territory with songs that will never be forgotten, and of "Russet Mantle," which told a comedy against a New Mexico background.

• • •

If prose style were the crucial element in a drama, "The Cream in the Well," which arrived at the Booth last evening, might be reckoned among his best works. Returning to the Indian territory again he is unfolding tragedy on a farm. Julie, one of the two Sawters daughters, is an evil person. Some strange hatred possesses her; she poisons life around her. In some mysterious fashion she has driven her brother off the farm at a moment when his father needs him most. She tortures a neighborhood woman into committing suicide. After marrying the widower she tortures him to drink. When her brother returns she begins at once to drive him away again. Although Julie is an intelligent woman with pride, taste and character, she radiates death and destruction wherever she goes.

• • •

As the drama develops on a serious plane, with characters that are well drawn and scenes that are well written, a theatregoer naturally looks for a motive. Why is Julie such an ogre? In the beginning there seems to be a suggestion of incest between her and the brother she has driven away. But this suggestion is unconfirmed so long that after a while a theatregoer begins to suspect he has invented it out of the customs and manners of farm plays of a decade ago. When the play is three-quarters over the brother blurts out the thought that has been in the audience's mind from the beginning. But by this time it has become anticlimax, and since incest has never actually occurred it is only another dark shadow passing imperceptibly across the blackness of night. In this playgoer's opinion it leaves "The Cream in the Well" without a motive that an inquiring mind can lean against. The dour tone of the play suggests some mystic moral thought that is never explained.

• • •

In the circumstances it is more difficult than usual to separate the performance from the play. On the surface Mr. Gabel's direction is rule-of-thumb craftsmanship, without much insight into the heart of the mystery, and some of the speaking is mumbled as though it did not matter. Martha Sleeper plays the part of the woman of evil with economy and spirit. Virginia Campbell and Harry Bratsburg act the attractive parts of two perfectly normal people with a pleasure that can be shared. As the mother, Mary Morris is formal and statuesque. Perry Wilson acts the part of the neighbor with all proper temperament. As the brother and the tortured husband, respectively, Leif Erickson and Myron McCormick are unable to make much impression on these elusive parts, and Ralph Theadore's lumbering farmer is conventional.

In designing an unlovely farmhouse living room and a ghostly bedroom Jo Mielziner has manfully restrained his color scheme and starved himself into austerity. The general result is a tragedy with the severity of "Desire Under the Elms" and the portentous style of "Mourning Becomes Electra," but without a tangible meaning. Less skillfully written, it would sound comic. But Mr. Riggs writes individual scenes so well that the problem of "The Cream in the Well" resolves itself in one word: Why?

"The Cream in the Well"

Reprinted from NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, *January 21, 1941*

"The Cream in the Well" Is Rather on Depressing Side

"The Cream in the Well," drama by Lynn Riggs. Produced by Carly Wharton and Martin Gabel at the Booth Theatre, New York, Jan. 20, 1941.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

IF IT is gloom they want, Jo Mielziner is one who can help them achieve it. This brilliant young scene designer has furnished a second-act bedroom for "The Cream in the Well" at the Booth Theatre, done in metallic, funereal grays, that so definitely crystallizes the theme and purpose of the play that nothing can rise above it.

And gloom does seem to be the chief desideratum of Lynn Riggs with this particular opus. The cream in the well sours and is waste. The human impulses of a family of Oklahoma farmers are also soured and laid waste and there is no joy of life in them, and no strength to overcome the curse.

Mr. Riggs must know, he having been born and reared in Oklahoma; even in the wide open spaces where men are a little boastful of being men and the winds of the prairies are clean winds and invigorating.

Unhappy Natives

Mr. Riggs may know, but there is little of the Oklahoma that has come to us through a variety of contacts that is recognizable in this picture. It may be that the dramatist, leaving home and studying life through the theatre, has come to feel a call to reveal his old neighbors to themselves.

He has turned psychoanalyst to show them what is wrong with Julie of the nut-brown hair and a hatred that is completely self-consuming. And what it was that drove Clabe away from home and into the Navy, and hounded him through to a dishonorable discharge.

Incest is the ugly word. They were possessed of an unholy love for each other, this unhappy brother and sister, and they worked each other's destruction through it. Or would have done so if Julie had not at the last moment achieved the courage to free them both.

Julie and Clabe are only two of the Sawters. There is Mother Sawters, who is also conscious of certain abnormal urgings struggling to break through her character. There is Father Sawters, who mopes and grows weak without the support of his son.

There is Bina Sawters, who was denied the advantages of even a rudimentary education, evidently because she seemed quite normal.

There were the neighbor Dunhams who found misery in their marriage until Mrs. Dunham drowned herself. After which the misery was passed on to Mr. Dunham and Julie.

Well, "The Cream in the Well" doesn't mean much to this correspondent. "Even a memory of evil is death," Clabe comes to believe when he has been partly relieved of his curse.

Sad Evening

Following that argument I suppose we, as playgoers, can reason that so free a sight of misery and consuming hatred as this theatre evening produces should also prove a little devastating.

There are fine performances in the playing. They serve to excite interest, but they cannot hope to stimulate sympathy, which is the second most salable of theatre emotions.

Martha Sleeper plays the unhappy Julie with such convincing earnestness one must believe absolutely in her. Perry Wilson matches her nicely as the equally miserable Mrs. Dunham.

Mary Morris strides impressively about nursing secrets with apparent understanding of their importance. Ralph Theadore lumbers and mopes with proper abandon, and Myron McCormick is a realistic Dunham.

Only Virginia Campbell, and Harry Bratsburg, as an incidental but wordy lawyer, are privileged to bring a little light to the story, and they do this pleasantly.

Mr. Gabel did the staging, which is at least consistent. A second Mielziner setting is cheerful.

Reprinted from NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, *January 21, 1941*

Southwest Tragedy

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

BEING one of our most serious dramatists, Lynn Riggs is in deadly earnest as he probes darkly into the more distressing passions of the pioneer Southwest.

The Indian Territory, just before it became part of the new State of Oklahoma, is the scene of his play, and his subject is the unpleasant relations between a hard, bitter and neurotic farm girl and her seafaring brother. Their family thinks that there is a great and terrible enmity between the two, and the way the girl behaves and the hard things that the boy says about her in his letters from China and the South Seas indicate that there is considerable justification for this belief.

But you and I, remembering something about the legend of Orestes and the plot of Mr. O'Neill's magnificent "Mourning Becomes Electra," know better than that.

• • •

It certainly is an unpleasant heroine that Mr. Riggs has picked for "The Cream in the Well." When the play opens she has already broken off the romance between her brother and a neighborhood girl and has caused the brother to leave the land he loves for the sea that he loathes. That, however, is just the beginning of her malice. Fearing that the brother still loves the fiancee he had deserted, she drives the poor girl to suicide and then proceeds to make miserable the life of the man she has married in a moment of irritation. Just about this time the brother returns from the sea, more bitter than ever, and I think that your surprise will be at a minimum when the tormented pair confess their terrible love and decide that the best thing for all concerned is that the girl jump in the near-by lake.

• • •

If my contemplation of what a serious and often striking dramatist intends as a serious play is not set down in a befitting mood of gravity, it is because "The Cream in the Well" seems to me a sadly ineffectual work. The author's earnestness is impressive, his feeling for the land he writes about is honest and real, his gift of words is occasionally a poetic and powerful one, and his theme is capable of producing great tragic drama. But Mr. Riggs has made his tragedy muddy, vague and strangely lacking in emotional values. His drama moves along tensely and straightforwardly enough but it never rises to any climax of importance or gives to the spectator any sense of pity or horror or emotional intensity. In the end, the big scene of final encounter between the passion-wracked brother and sister seems flat and without genuine dramatic power.

• • •

Although the characters never seem figures of tragic importance, I do not think that the actors can be blamed. Miss Martha Sleeper is occasionally rather too modern and cultured in manner for a farm girl of 1906, but she plays the bitter heroine with force and honesty and without softness. Leif Erickson is but moderately effective as the brother, but, then, the role is too sketchily written. Ralph Theadore, always a good actor, is excellent as the ineffectual father of the twisted family, and Miss Mary Morris is helpful in the vague character of the mother. Then, in addition, there are admirable performances by Miss Perry Wilson as the ex-fiancee driven to suicide, by Miss Virginia Campbell as the normal sister of the family, by Myron McCormick as the unhappy husband and by Harry Bratsburg as some incidental comic relief. But "The Cream in the Well" is not the drama we have all been hoping for from Mr. Riggs.